

Chronicles of Diversity

Your leadership weekly



The short grass prairie and the forested hills of central Montana

Passing through

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Judeo-Christian theology is pretty unique among theistic and pantheistic religions in that it does not consider the attributes of creation to be sacred. Instead, it makes only the Creator holy and due religious reverence.

A number of years ago when I was hiking the Wonderland Trail around Mt. Rainier, as I left Paradise and headed for Longmire, I was soon deep within a beautiful old growth forest of magnificent trees. As I passed through these awesome stands, I could not help think, that if you did not personally know the Creator of this wonder, you would have to invent or create a god for yourself, in order to maintain your sanity in the presence of these awesome wonders of creation.

The native peoples of virtually every land have created religions to worship Animals, Heavenly sights, the Earth itself. By the eternity in their human spirit, some have even worshiped the Great Spirit, even though they had no specific illumination of His real name or attributes. Following in the Christian tradition and reinforced by naturalism, western culture generally has lost all regard for nature as anything greater, than to be admired in certain places and exploited, sometimes violently in others. Many times the physical distance between the wonder and pillage is just a short trip.

Just because something is deemed in the theological sense, common, does not mean that we are not called to be stewards of our natural and our cultural communities. In fact, that same sense of awe when you gaze at nature's blessings, can be transformed into a deeper knowledge of your own abilities and opportunities, if you take that time to more fully investigate the incredible depth of the created ecosystem. But that deeper understanding is not really available to the casual visitor, or those just passing through. With some training in what you are seeing creation becomes such a valuable a resource.

Once you pass the microcosm of the State of Washington and venture into Idaho heading for the state of Minnesota, such an opportunity for this deeper learning presents itself. However, the goal of

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virtually everyone on the highway is just passing through. Tourists, truck drivers, and a single Laidlaw bus, are all on a schedule to be somewhere else soon. A time consuming problem to get where we are going.

We are traveling from where people are, to where other people are. There are relatively few people in Idaho, Montana, and North Dakota, little perceived culture, no air conditioning in the bus, no Starbucks, so why are we really here, we are just passing through. Unless of course we were blessed enough to fly, then we are just flying over. Flying over, makes this four day road trip last about four hours. There is also probably a Starbucks in the Minneapolis airport.

So it is with our modern life. It is just an impatient trip from high school to retirement. In this hectic world there is just no time to see what we might learn from the common creation, or the common people of Idaho, Montana, and North Dakota. No time to talk to the Native American, who has time to take is son fishing almost every evening. Are we missing something important here?

I took a book on this trip to read. Supposedly, about one man's effort to stop a gold mine in the Blackfoot River Valley, running ruffly parallel to the Clark Fork as we traveled on I-90 east of Missoula. I didn't read much on the trip, too little time, except on the bus, and reading on the bus has a tendency to make me sick. So now, I have begun this task again.

As I finished the chapter last night, the author mentioned that perhaps the world's two greatest luxuries were solitude and silence. Put into the context of all the world's population he is right. What Bible teachers mention as quite time in your prayer closet, is really not solitude and silence, but just a prefabricated physical or spiritual box, where you are marginally successful in trying to tune out the world and tune into God.

After His baptism, Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, the Messiah of the world, was not sent into his prayer closet, but into the wilderness. We passed by wilderness on our way to Minnesota, but we were too busy passing through, so the wilderness must be passed by. And God knows there is not any silence or solitude on a yellow school bus with fifty passengers.

In the Bible, the translation for wilderness and desert are pretty much the same root, the wilderness is desert, and the desert is wilderness. A common definition of wilderness in North America is a place were people visit but do not stay, or habitat. David in Psalm 19 speaks about the speech of common creation in the silence and the solitude:

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
And the firmament shows His handiwork.
Day unto day utters speech,
And night unto night reveals knowledge.
There is no speech nor language
Where their voice is not heard.
Their line has gone out through all the earth,
And their words to the end of the world.
In them He has set a tabernacle for the sun,
Which is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,
And rejoices like a strong man to run its race.
Its rising is from one end of heaven,
And its circuit to the other end;
And there is nothing hidden from its heat.*

*The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul;
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;
The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;
The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold,
Yea, than much fine gold;*

*Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.
Moreover by them Your servant is warned,
And in keeping them there is great reward.*

*Who can understand his errors?
Cleanser me from secret faults.
Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins;
Let them not have dominion over me.
Then I shall be blameless,
And I shall be innocent of great transgression.*

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
Be acceptable in Your sight,
O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer.*

David, knowing the commandments of God, was reminded and humbled by his natural encounter, bringing “the man after God’s own heart,” into a deeper communion with his Creator. My time among the old growth cathedral on Mt. Rainier was a similar experience.

As you leave Washington and begin the highway climb through the Bitterroot Mountains you pass through the Silver Valley, one of the most heavily polluted areas of North America. But little of it now shows, because of the closing of the mines and the ability of creation to quickly become reestablished. Then the timbered slopes as you climb to Idaho’s Lookout Pass indicate more than adequate snow and rainfall to allow for a lush coniferous forest.

Passing the summit and heading into the Bitterroot Valley of Montana the timber remains on the hills, but slowly the valley floor begins to be covered with dry land grasses. As you continue eastward, the trees slowly disappear being replaced by more and more grasses, except on the highest elevations. Soon as the topographical relief lessens, we have arrived on the semiarid grassland of the short grass prairie.

Before we get that far however, we must pass through Missoula heading up the Interstate and the Clark Fork River, to the city of Butte and eventually over the continental divide. Butte, we outsiders, not knowing the Montana jargon for the area, have dropped the “e.” If the Silver Valley was polluted, we quickly pass through the largest Superfund site in the country and one of the most polluted areas of the world.

Butte and the huge Berkley Pit, give this section of “Big Sky Country” its more pejorative feel, but never fear, the madonna of “Our Lady of the Rockies” peers longingly over the city, facing west as Paul Bunyan in Bemidji, perhaps as the created idol to save the city and its pit, as a visual representation of Hell on earth, which is the ecological prophecy of this copper city.

Onward through Montana, North Dakota, and into Minnesota, as the rainfall increases, the height of the grasses does the same. Until someplace, known only to the ecologically educated in the region, you arrive surrounded by the tall grass prairie.

As I took a wee nap upon entering Minnesota, I was astonished to wake up in the timber again. It wasn’t that I didn’t know it was coming, it was just that I wanted to see how abruptly it happened. That amazement was then highly anticipated as we began our return trip, back to and through the grasslands.

Trees need more water than grasses to survive, and as you arrive in the trees, you again find more people. More water means life is easier, you don’t need to be as dependent on nature (or God) for your existence. If you drive another five hours south and east of Bemidji you reach the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. The first truly urban area east of Seattle. In our Indian tale of Paul Bunyan last week, his clean shaven appearance was looking wistfully westward, for it is a long way indeed to the land of the next clear cut. Again in the mountains of western Montana, Idaho, and Washington.

In the United States we have never significantly dealt, in a constructive or stewardship way with the wilderness, or the desert, or even the semiarid, highly productive, grasslands, except to try and export the lifestyle of the forest and its abundant rain. We are great at passing through, and flying

over. But to make the prairie as productive as it was when we took over we have failed miserably. Sure we have divided it into little squares, over grazed some squares into brown dirt with cattle, sheep, and horses. Grown hay and grain on other squares and fed it to the cattle, sheep, and horses so that they can survive the winter, or until they can be marketed. This is the definition of progress!

Now the wilderness question of this millennia: Can an individual, or human culture for that matter, survive physically if it can not properly deal with the arid land of their spiritual life? That answer is why Jesus needed real wilderness.

We like to treat the dry times of our lives, in our prayer closet, or as though we are just passing through, or flying over. But those times are not over flown, quickly passed through, or overcome, they are lived in sync with the created seasons of God's design, by solitude and silence. But how can we know the value of true solitude or silence, or the law of the lord, or gain the proper perspective for gold, unless we grow like the grasses of the prairie in season? Just as important, how can we truly be fruitful in abundance unless we have experienced the times of depravity, or drought?

Of such is the common grace wisdom of common things, common people. Common is awesome, that is to people who have experienced to some degree, true solitude and true silence. It is only then that God speaks. To most however, it is just a rite of passage, from one place to another, one fancy unto disparity. It is then only in true solitude and silence that our priorities change and we are moved beyond the depravity of man, to get a glimpse of the Big Montana Sky that the Psalmist David brings so eloquently into our souls.

Seeds for Prayer

I leave tomorrow morning to spend the next week or so on the microcosm prairie of Washington and some of its transition to forest land. I must return on the 18th for a pre little finger operation appointment. There is way too much to do in that time and I do not know how long or significant will be my recovery.

It looks as if I may have a renter for the house in Reardan, if the Christian brother, who is helping paint this house, gets the job he is interviewing for in Spokane this week. That would be a true answer to prayer, before the prayer last week was even distributed.

As with the trip to Minnesota, I am not too sure about the internet connections in Spokane for next week's issue, but I think I have got it handled, we shall see. I do have the sequel for this weeks message in my mind, so please stay tuned.